


“Some Sanity and Love”: The Cold War, Antarctic Treaty, and Fids’ identity, 1957–1958

Andrew J. Avery 

Department of History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

Research Article

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Author for correspondence:

Andrew J. Avery, Email: averyaj@ku.edu

Abstract

In 1942, the British government created the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) to enforce sovereignty over the Antarctic Peninsula. The small groups of men who worked for the Survey called themselves Fids. During the late 1950s when Antarctic sovereignty was being hotly debated and worked out by national governments, Fids serving at British bases criticised the British government’s use of science as a bargaining chip. Using in-house magazines written and printed at FIDS bases and oral histories, this article examines how Fids viewed Antarctic politics and how those events influenced daily life at bases on the Peninsula.

Since 1942, the British government had devoted considerable time defending its sovereignty claim to the Antarctic against Argentinian and Chilean incursions, including an application for arbitration to the International Court of Justice. During the latter years of the 1950s, some Fids criticised what they saw as political exploitation of scientific work by governments through the International Geophysical Year (IGY) and, to combat this, prioritised the unifying effect of suffering that bound men of all nations working on Antarctica. Of the IGY, one Fid wrote, “Unfortunately IGY was launched with the usual fanfare of modern publicity, and though conceived in a spirit of international cooperation was soon prostituted before the altar of power politics” (BAS, Spring, 1957, p. 1). The reactions of those working on Antarctica to the broader political developments during this period warrant attention, even their silences. The Antarctic Treaty was to be the first step in fulfilling what Antarctica should be in the minds of some Fids: a collaborative space for scientific work from across the globe. Some Fids working on Antarctica did not adhere blindly to their government’s strategies. A minority of Fids argued that suffering transcended national allegiances. Through their criticisms, some Fids resisted Cold War Manichaeism and emphasised not just collaborative science but also collective suffering in Antarctica. By analysing the voices of Fids, one can better understand how those working on Antarctica reacted to and spoke about international negotiations, illustrating the depth of these events and complexity of reactions on the ground rather than at the debating table.

The example developed here is rooted in the experience of British men (women were barred from serving at stations) serving with the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey (FIDS) during the aftermath of the Second World War. FIDS was designed to be the forward operating presence of the British polar empire, and there was an acute awareness that the Falkland Island Dependencies were under assault from counter-claimants, Argentina and Chile. The role of the US could not be taken for granted either. Fids were told on their introduction that their primary role was to map and survey for the purpose of strengthening British occupation. Many of the men dispatched to far south serve long periods in comparative isolation and minimal contact with others (Dodds, 2002, pp. 19–22).

Bonds of human suffering

Fids working on the Antarctic Peninsula during the IGY reflected on their entanglement in international politics, and the role science played in it through explorations of suffering published in base magazines. Living in small research stations with minimal facilities was mentally and physically demanding. For many Fids, suffering (in its various forms) was the touchstone of Antarctic experience and helped Fids conceptualise these bases as distinct places. As Hester Blum has noted, polar expeditions produced an archive of documents including polar newspapers (Blum, 2019). Print cultures enabled not only occupied the men during the long winter months of comparative isolation but also provided opportunities for what was often described as “letting off steam.” It was not uncommon for several FIDS bases to produce their own magazine, which might include news stories, cartoons, and personal musings, many of which dealt with types of suffering, whether that be a skimpy supply of alcohol, the loss of friends in accidents, and the tediousness of “laying up” in huts during long winter days with bad weather. To be sure, though, there were many joyous times, tender memories, and entertaining Midwinter

parties. As Carolyn Strange has written about Scott's last expedition, these masculine spaces were defined as much by joy and cheerfulness as they were by harshness and adversity (Strange, 2012). Writing also contributed to the reinforcement of social and professional hierarchies. FIDS had base commanders. The number of support staff generally outnumbered university-trained scientists. Beyond that, the bases were composed of men from a diversity of professional backgrounds and social classes; some were war veterans, some attended elite universities such as Cambridge, and some were there because they performed a specialist role such as doctor or pilot.

Base magazines provide fascinating insights into how science and politics were negotiated in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "The advent of thermo nuclear weapons has finally decided that a scientist cannot embark on a program of research without considering its humanitarian implications," wrote the same anonymous Fid in the midwinter edition of *Halley's Comet*, drawing a stark line around all scientists and connecting them to the creation of the atomic age, binding them to a moral quandary about the give and take between scientists and the state, their patrons (BAS, Midwinter, 1957, p. 1). It was a theme he returned to in October 1957, taking aim at the political hay being made out of *Sputnik I* by western media, extrapolating this reaction into a narrative of imperial and civilizational decline, by no means an unpopular or rare perception. The author pinned this "decline" on "radio and television broadcasts in the capital cities of the world, rushed into fall when the Russians launched their Earth satellite" (BAS, Spring, 1957, p. 1). He continued,

3000 years after the psalmist mused on the land beyond the hills we have been shown the stars. This is an outstanding achievement irrespective of the race colour or creed of its creators and deserves the highest praise from all sides. Instead they get ridicule and abuse, the press of the free world nurtured [sic] on anti-communism and manured by American sour grapes see earth satellites as a new item for the U.N. disarmament conference. Are all IGY projects to share the same fate? Are the Antarctic expeditions only assessing the continent for its use as a super Woomera? Such questions must spring to mind when one sees the reception given to the earth satellite. (BAS, Spring, 1957, p. 1)

The Fid's return to nuclear destruction, the reference to the Woomera nuclear testing sight in South Australia (used by the UK to test its nuclear capabilities with direct implications for indigenous communities living in the region), reverberates with his previous writings, an acknowledgement of the destructive potential made possible through scientific research. They were pawns in the Nuclear Age, and there was little separating them from their Soviet counterparts, who were villainised by the US. Such vilification contradicted the real mission of IGY and, so the Fid contended, Antarctic science. Society could not appreciate the scientific advances achieved by *Sputnik I*, the showing of the stars, because western, anti-communist governments were too busy whipping the population into fervency.

To combat this prevailing culture of political polarisation, this Fid drew from a common idea promoted in writings from the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration: the transcendence of suffering above all national differences. "At least let us remember next time a politician refers to Russian dictators that they, like us, can only shovel snow and swear when their tractors are bogged down in a soft snow," wrote one Fid (BAS, Midwinter, 1957, pp. 1–3). All Antarctic parties were unified by their problems, by the adversity Antarctica presented. Had not the Japanese and Americans, like the British, also seen their prefabricated huts warp in the extreme temperatures? Did the French chefs at Terre Adélie not "have the same difficulty making dough rise as ours have?"

(BAS, Midwinter, 1957, p. 3). This spirit of cooperation, the collective battling against Antarctic problems, could be used to "inject some sanity and love into the power politics at home" (BAS, Midwinter, 1957, p. 3). This Fid's thoughts stand out for their pointedness, the contention of governmental manipulation of scientific collaboration (BAS, Midwinter, 1957, p. 3). Further, this Fid demarcates Antarctic workers as being separate from their sponsoring governments.

In this way, this Fid painted himself as much a victim of Cold War rhetoric and governments as the general populace, perhaps conveniently overlooking their own complicity. So, Fids were not conducting this research for scientific purposes alone but FIDS had never existed solely for science and this ought to have been common knowledge for anyone joining their ranks. The Fid continued; their mission was "a greater one for humanity" (BAS, Midwinter, 1957, p. 3). Suffering was the keystone to this humanitarian mission, the foundation on which all countries might build, and established a horizontal connection that subverted the vertical, bureaucratic hierarchy in London. Some Fids contended these human connections on the Peninsula transcended the national divisions and agendas being played out in London or Washington.

Despite being written by someone working for an imperial state concerned about that nation's decline, the Fid's inclusive and transnational, if not global, vision of Antarctic collaboration aligned with the purported goals behind the transition into Treaty negotiations. Given the correlation between the momentum generated by the IGY and the policy of limiting Antarctic Treaty negotiations to those who had participated in the Geophysical Year, this voice shouting from the mimeographed pages is curious and notable (Howkins, 2017, pp. 153–155). Criticism of the British government is not lacking in the pages of *Halley Comet* and similar publications produced before and after it. The usual tone of those articles is tongue-in-cheek. For example, a cartoon showing a maniacal and villainous Met officer wielding power to control weather and, therefore, make Fid life miserable by summoning great blizzards. Seeing the IGY as a political perversion of a sound international scientific scheme, this Fid used Antarctic suffering and frustration as the real tie that bound the British to everyone else swearing and shoveling snow.

Subverting London

The Fid's thesis of inclusion (to what scale we cannot be sure) contested the British government official opinion, one expressed in a Dominion Office working paper on Antarctica prepared in fall 1957, that the "Cold War has not yet been extended to the Antarctic" (Working Paper, 1957, pp. 2–3). For all the supposed lack of a Cold War in Antarctica Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union spent plenty of time jockeying at IGY conference tables, to say nothing of the diplomatic-sovereignty gymnastics, the British government had spent the better part of 1940s and 1950s performing with Argentina and Chile (Howkins, 2008, pp. 596–617). As the Fid's editorial also shows, the Cold War was something that Antarcticists thought about and took umbrage with. The same working paper concluded, in the middle of the IGY, "The present current of opinion in many countries, fomented partly by public interest in the I.G.Y., is favourable to international co-operation in the Antarctic" (Working Paper, 1957, pp. 2–3). In an ironic twist, the very bodies the Fid pilloried in his writings played a substantial role in opening, partially, the Antarctic and

“freezing” sovereign claims, a process marked by the signature of the Antarctic Treaty in Washington DC on 1 December 1959 (Howkins, 2008).

For some Fids, the transition into the Antarctic Treaty era affected their daily routines and duties, ridding them of the need to distribute trespassing notices and, for some, affirming their transnational ideal of Antarctic science. A policy of collaboration was by no means novel. The Norwegian–British–Swedish Antarctic Expedition served as a small-scale predecessor to the IGY, including the convoluted political–scientific issues (Roberts, 2011, pp. 141–157). Lionel Shirtcliffe spent his first year at Deception Island in charge of chandlery and the base’s workshop, in which he produced signs deterring trespassers. Shirtcliffe asked a colleague, George Hemmen, “Is this a joke or this serious?” “Oh this is serious,” replied Hemmen. “Yes we are supposed to put this notice up to keep the Chileans and the Argentinians in their place, you see.” Shirtcliffe recalled his response to his colleague, “well crikey they are only human like us you know.” He would later think, “They are only like us, and we are all working in the Antarctic, and why should you dislike them because they’re another nation?” (Working Paper, 1957, pp. 2–3).

From this example, one can see how political events occurring thousands of miles away directly affected those working on the Peninsula, the group who had to enforce formal sovereignty even when to do seemed pointless or silly, a responsibility of the absurd that speaks to relative levels of autonomy Fids operated in. Hemmen took the enforcement of British sovereignty seriously, and he was not without like-minded peers, both in Antarctica and London. The differing opinions between Hemmen and Shirtcliffe also reflect the same fundamental tensions expressed in *Halley Comet* prior that those tasked with enforcing sovereignty and gathering knowledge for Cold War governments criticised those bodies and subverted the anti-Soviet propaganda, seeking instead of commonality. Shirtcliffe remembered feeling relief when he heard about the Treaty, “thank heaven for that” (BAS, 2009, p. 33).

Representatives from many governments, including the US, UK, USSR, Argentina, and Chile to name a few, brought political motives to the Antarctic Treaty negotiating tables. Despite this, they managed to agree on matters of nuclear weapons testing, exchanging scientific personnel, and free exchange of information, among others. Some Fids criticised government manipulation of

science and the complicity of press in exacerbating Cold War differences. Suffering and commonality were more important. The Antarctic Treaty began the process of opening Antarctica, creating a space of commonality that better aligned with some Fid’s ideals of inclusion and collaboration because, unlike many of those government officials, they knew that Antarctica could make any person suffer regardless of their nationality or political ideology.

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